

## Hannah Arendt and Her Critique of Dystopia

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### ABSTRACT

This paper examines Hannah Arendt's critique of dystopia through her analysis of totalitarianism as a distinct and comprehensive form of domination that exceeds conventional authoritarian rule. Drawing primarily on *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and Arendt's broader political thought, the study argues that totalitarian regimes—exemplified historically by Nazism and Stalinism—represent not a contingent political deviation but a modern crisis rooted in the collapse of traditional standards and the obstruction of meaningful political action. The paper analyzes Arendt's account of the conditions that enable totalitarianism to emerge, including the erosion of the public realm, the weakening of shared judgment, and the social dynamics that facilitate mass domination. It then investigates the mechanisms by which totalitarian power operates, focusing on its drive toward total control, the destruction of plurality, the dissolution of individual identity, and the systematic assault on human dignity. Finally, the research highlights Arendt's intellectual efforts to envision pathways beyond dystopian domination by restoring politics as a space of free, collective action and renewing the principles of plurality, dialogue, responsibility, and active citizenship. The study concludes that, for Arendt, resisting totalitarianism is inseparable from reconstructing the public sphere as the institutional and ethical ground of freedom and critical thinking.

### INTRODUCTION

Totalitarianism is one of the most prominent concepts that has sparked wide controversy in contemporary political philosophy, due to the fundamental threat it poses to the foundations of human and political life. It is not merely a traditional authoritarian system of rule, but rather a comprehensive pattern of domination that seeks complete control over all aspects of human existence.

The German political philosopher Hannah Arendt played a pioneering role in analyzing this form of governance through her profound critical study, which placed totalitarianism at the heart of the philosophical and political understanding of the twentieth century. Arendt drew on the horrific historical experience represented by the Nazi and Stalinist regimes to expose the internal structure of the totalitarian system and its mechanisms for crushing human dignity, dissolving individual identity, and destroying the public sphere based on plurality and dialogue.

She argued that these regimes were not just accidental deviations in political history but embodiments of the crisis of modernity and the outcome of the collapse of traditional standards and the blockage of horizons for free political action. In this context, Arendt, especially in her major works foremost among them *The Origins of Totalitarianism* sought to go beyond mere moral condemnation toward a theoretical understanding, aiming to dismantle the deep structures of totalitarianism and explore possibilities for overcoming it.

In her critique, she combined personal experience with philosophical argument, and political history with sociological analysis, offering one of the most serious intellectual projects in addressing totalitarianism. This research aims to study Hannah Arendt's conception of the totalitarian system through her analysis of its emergence,

mechanisms, and effects on human beings and society. It also discusses her intellectual attempts to develop ways of overcoming it by restoring politics as a space of free and shared action, and reviving the concepts of plurality, dialogue, and active citizenship. This proceeds from her deep conviction that understanding politics begins with resisting totalitarianism, and that regaining human dignity requires rebuilding the public sphere on the foundations of freedom, responsibility, and critical thinking.

### **First Requirement: The Meaning of Totalitarianism**

The term *totalitarianism* is one of the central concepts in the field of contemporary political philosophy, as it refers to a system of rule that monopolizes power and subjects all aspects of individual and collective life to the domination of the state or ruling party. The first systematic use of the term goes back to the Italian journalist and anti-fascist politician Giovanni Amendola, who used it in 1923 to describe Benito Mussolini's regime, highlighting Mussolini's rejection of political liberalism and disregard for legal and constitutional principles.

It is noteworthy that the term also attracted increasing interest within fascist circles themselves, especially after the Italian philosopher Giovanni Gentile elaborated on the idea of the "totalitarian spirit." Most researchers agree that these early uses of the term preceded the full emergence of what later became known as "totalitarianism" in Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia.

Arendt devoted most of her studies to critiquing and dismantling these totalitarian systems, especially Nazism and Stalinism, while seeking ways to escape them. Her works include titles such as *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, published in 1951 as a detailed study of totalitarian regimes, their intertwined apparatuses, and their brutal expansionist strategies that dominated the early to mid-twentieth century.

She defines totalitarianism as follows:

"Whenever totalitarianism manages to climb to power, it generates a new form or institutions entirely different from what preceded it, working to destroy all the social and political traditions and the legal frameworks existing in the country. It transforms and dissolves social classes into mere abstract masses."

In other words, such regimes destroy the basic structures of society in all its dimensions, while also exerting control over individuals, stripping them of privacy and identity.

Moreover, Arendt's vision can also be analyzed in relation to the events of the Holocaust and the Stalinist camps. As a Jew who was subjected to the worst forms of violence and persecution against Jews, Arendt saw the concentration and extermination camps in totalitarian regimes as true "laboratories" for the application of the totalitarian doctrine, which is built on the notion that "everything is possible" and that all boundaries are transgressible. These camps were not merely aimed at exterminating people or degrading their dignity; they were designed to eradicate any form of human spontaneity, reducing the human being to a mere "thing," even less than an animal.

From here, Arendt's depth in describing the totalitarian system becomes evident. She made the death camps a central focus of her analyses, going further to expose the absence of consciousness in totalitarian regimes, as well as their mechanisms of destroying intermediary institutions and forcing individuals into isolation. This vision of the totalitarian system can be seen as a reflection of her personal experience with the camps, which became a starting point for her profound understanding of the dynamics of power and domination in such regimes.

Arendt described totalitarian regimes or as she preferred to call them, "the crisis of her age" as products of historical conditions marked by the collapse of traditional political structures, which facilitated their rapid rise to power. Hitler exploited the state of social collapse in Germany, portraying the German people as a "scattered human mass suffering from unemployment and extreme poverty," while Stalin faced a complex bureaucratic system reflecting a deep institutional crisis.

Arendt stressed that the totalitarian rise was not an abrupt rupture with the political past, but rather a natural extension of the dictatorships and authoritarian regimes that prevailed during the nineteenth century. Thus, totalitarian regimes gave rise to modern dystopian political systems. Accordingly, totalitarianism can be understood as the outcome of a comprehensive crisis affecting all aspects of life political, economic, and social where the collapse of traditional institutions paved the way for the emergence of regimes that drew their legitimacy from this very collapse.

### **Second Requirement: Critique of Totalitarianism and the Possibilities of Overcoming It**

Hannah Arendt did not present utopian theories regarding the political systems prevailing in her time. Rather, her primary focus was on the principle of understanding politics and its ruling systems. Her philosophy was essentially critical toward totalitarian regimes, which clearly embodied dystopian manifestations, as in the case of Nazi and fascist systems, where oppression, coercion, and intellectual persecution were especially evident. She states:

"Power can exist only in the presence of freedom, and totalitarian government can arise only when the public sphere where people can interact with one another freely is destroyed."

Totalitarian regimes deprive people of their freedom and reduce them to mere instruments subject to these regimes, without any attempt at independent thought or opinion. Thus, any system of rule that strips human beings of their freedom is a dystopian, chaotic system, making blind obedience humanity's fundamental ideology. "Totalitarianism is the killing of freedom and its negation."

On this basis, the resignation of reason and conscience from bearing responsibility consciously is striking, since the perpetrators of massacres such as Eichmann and others among the henchmen of totalitarian authorities were nothing more than a small and trivial part of the totalitarian bureaucratic machine that left them no room to feel their humanity, let alone to act in a humane way. This is not an excuse for their actions but rather a condemnation on a broader level not reducing them to the incident itself, but in their human essence, which had been transformed into a meaningless existence.

The totalitarian regimes executed their plan for control and the abolition of political action by fostering a negative idea among people: that Western democracies had brought illusions and deceptions which must be exposed and fought against, and thus joining a totalitarian movement was necessary to confront them. Among these illusions was the belief that the people significantly contributed to decision-making by supporting one party or another. Another illusion lay in the portrayal of these democratic systems of the masses as worthless, reducing them to a silent instrument within the political sphere.

For Arendt, among the three basic human activities labor, work, and action she chose *action*, considering it the activity specific to politics. Action and speech create a space free from domination, where everyone is engaged in interactive relationships, exchanging opinions and reaching persuasion. For this reason, political authority is defined as the capacity for effective communication, which violence can destroy. Contemporary evaluations of labor have neglected the sphere of action. Bureaucracy, technology, and mass existence have all contributed to depoliticization, thereby facilitating the path toward total control.

Arendt often observed that politics was associated in the thought of many thinkers with domination, conquest, and violence. But she argued that this negative view of politics stemmed from preconceived judgments tied to humanity's crisis-ridden condition, a condition which is not humanity's inevitable fate and from which one cannot derive the essence of politics. Indeed, humanity has known relatively healthy conditions in earlier ages, in the true sense of politics as *dialogue, communication, and exchange*. The negative view of politics led some to consider entrusting authority to bureaucracy in order to avoid the arbitrariness of personal rule. Yet bureaucracy may turn into the most dangerous form of political domination, for in it, power is anonymous and invisible.

Arendt argued that totalitarian regimes manifest dystopia through organized terror and the destruction of human dignity. She affirmed that victims of totalitarian regimes suffer a fate worse than death, which she described as a longing for death, similar to those in earlier ages who were believed to be condemned to eternal punishments in hell. She insisted this vision of hell should be taken literally, not metaphorically, because although over centuries of Christian faith men proved incapable of establishing the City of God as a dwelling place for humanity, they have now demonstrated that it is indeed possible to establish hell on earth instead of the hereafter.

In totalitarian systems, terror is not only used to intimidate people but is also employed in conjunction with propaganda campaigns to justify the regime's actions and falsify collective consciousness. By controlling people's minds, they ensure obedience without thought:

"We realized early on, and often affirmed, that in totalitarian countries, terror and propaganda go hand in hand, to the extent that they are two sides of the same coin."

This propaganda implants ideologies into people's minds, presenting criminal acts as necessary actions for protection or under other pretexts.

Totalitarian regimes can only control people if they are isolated from one another. Thus, the foremost concern of all authoritarian systems is to produce such isolation. In a despotic system, political bonds among people are severed, preventing human readiness for action and power. The iron circle imposed by these regimes leaves no room for private life, since an isolated human being is easier to control, whereas a human engaged in social relations is more resistant.

Before any movement reaches power, it must at an initial and necessary stage garner support and gain as many followers as possible. This is achieved through propaganda campaigns that attract public opinion, eager for all kinds of propaganda. Propaganda seeks to implant ideas and entrench them in the minds of the majority. For it to succeed, the ideas must be new and unprecedented. Thus, the first step is to sow seeds of discord among individuals, inciting them toward violent revolt, rejection of the prevailing conditions, and rebellion. Afterward comes the stage of presenting the movement's new ideas as a healthy alternative to those conditions.

Accordingly, Arendt stated:

"The power of totalitarian propaganda lies in its growing ability to cut off the masses from the real world, even before the movements have gained power to draw an iron curtain, in order to prevent anyone from disturbing the grim, entirely imagined world of their own making."

For this reason, Arendt suggested that in order to escape these regimes, human beings must first become self-aware, possessing free thought to express opinions or hold beliefs without dogma imposed upon them. For Arendt, thought does not only represent the essence of spiritual life but also expresses the most important and noble intellectual activity. It is an activity capable of distancing itself from the world of appearances, withdrawing from it in order to grasp its meaning and truth, while engaging in a process of perpetual self-critique. Added to this is its reflective character, which allows it to recognize its independence from the world of activity and action. From here, thought derives its primacy over other activities: it is the source from which human life draws its meaning by realizing its reflective dimension, its continuity, and its self-dialogue. Since thought itself possesses these qualities and this capacity to transcend the system and the logic of reality, it becomes the foundation for freedom.

Arendt considered revolutions to be a necessary response against oppressive regimes, as they were the only possible path to freedom and to reorganizing the political and social order on new foundations. She regarded revolutions as opportunities for change, since they had become a political phenomenon recurring across times and places. She made the American and French revolutions exemplary models of struggle, showing how to radically transform people's conditions. Thus, the aim of revolution is to achieve a form of social equality. Arendt emphasized that equality and freedom are the products of human effort and characteristics of the world built by humanity.

Freedom, according to Arendt, can only exist within the political sphere, because politics is the realm that guarantees human survival and liberty. She argued that the goal of revolution was the securing of civil rights; the aim was not freedom in itself, but liberation from governments that had overstepped their bounds and violated long-established rights.

Politics, in Arendt's view, guarantees each person a place in society. She rejected the idea that democracy, as it exists today, reflects the true form of politics. True politics deals with how different individuals live together and interrelate. People organize themselves politically around essential issues, which may be present or may emerge from the chaos of differences. These differences and diverse viewpoints are, for Arendt, crucial elements in understanding the conditions necessary for political action.

Plurality is considered one of the essential characteristics of action, where its meaning becomes evident and pronounced. Action must produce something new and present it to others, and it cannot withdraw from them, because action by its very nature requires interaction. Here the concept of plurality emerges as a kind of increase in actors within the sphere of freedom, which guarantees the existence of political action. Just as artists need an audience to see or listen to them, without this appearance in public spaces and without receiving recognition from others, and without introducing the self and its projects through words and deeds, political action cannot be established, as it strongly needs plurality as another means to guarantee freedom. ( )

Action, as a form of discussion and activity aimed at reaching agreement to manage political affairs in the best way, inherently contains within its principles which concern freedom and equality the creation of a shared sense that embodies the task and its risks. Therefore, it generates a kind of solidarity that political action must produce, supported by education and upbringing toward this action and through engagement in it, which will be clearly evident in every moment of political change, in addition to its fundamental requirement for action as an effective faculty in political treatment.

When a politician seeks to merge the multiple into the one, and to destroy the common space among people which represents the particularity of the world and expels man from the oasis to the desert and isolation, then this politician has understood nothing of the political. Isolation, as a severance from every relation with the other, carries the danger of turning into melancholy and poison. Thus, the plurality of peoples, the diversity of cultures, the recourse to communicative reason, and intersubjective action are all necessary elements to ensure the reality of inhabiting the world.

Arendt takes a negative stance toward modern representative democracy because it prevents any possibility for citizens to participate in the production of institutions in a space where the citizen cannot truly exist. For her, politics is the substance of governmental decisions taken in the name of the people, and such decisions cannot be made by one citizen or a group of citizens over others as if they embodied the will of the people. Therefore, she criticized the idea of parties and groups that reduce the species and free associations. She proposed instead a system of councils, which she considered the only alternative to the current political system. These councils would be democratically elected around specific issues and would remain open so that citizens could engage and genuinely represent themselves within them. This would occur through innovation in political thought and the recovery of the public sphere (the common space).

In conclusion, we can say that building a strong human reconciliation against all fears resulting from one person's domination over another requires us to establish a global neighborhood linking all nations. This must be founded on mutual understanding and living together as a common homeland, where we live in a global union among peoples and share one destiny. Our destruction may also be alike; therefore, global communication remains the goal of eternal peace that unites us on ethical values. For no one can claim full understanding of matters except

in moments of dialogue. Thus, our thinking about saving humanity can only come through a liberationist movement that primarily seeks the unity of humankind on comprehensive foundations built upon experiences of coexistence.

## CONCLUSION

In light of the above, it becomes evident that Hannah Arendt's intellectual project constitutes one of the most significant philosophical attempts to critique totalitarianism and dismantle its repressive mechanisms. Through her profound analysis of the internal structure of totalitarian systems and her personal experience with oppression and persecution, Arendt succeeded in linking theory with practice, and philosophical analysis with political reality, to reveal the magnitude of the threat these regimes pose to human dignity, individual freedom, and the public sphere.

She demonstrated that totalitarianism is not merely a political deviation but rather a deep existential and intellectual crisis that threatens the essence of humanity and its relationship with the world. She also affirmed that salvation does not lie solely in overthrowing these regimes, but in rebuilding the public sphere on the foundations of plurality, dialogue, citizenship, and free thinking. It is a call to redefine politics as a space for action and participation, not as a field of domination and violence.

Thus, Arendt's thought remains alive and relevant in our contemporary era, where new forms of totalitarianism continue to threaten societies in renewed ways. Her thought therefore endures as a beacon for all who seek to understand the roots of tyranny and to work toward a world that is freer, more just, and more humane.

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